



Annual report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England

January 2010

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications, and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out reviews of higher education provision in higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges, on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

1.2 The contract between QAA and HEFCE for 2009-10 requires QAA to provide a detailed account of audit and review activity for the academic year September 2008-August 2009.

1.3 The contract stipulates that:

'QAA shall by 31 January each year prepare and submit to HEFCE a report which:

- a. Provides a summary and overview of all review activity undertaken by QAA during the preceding academic year. This will incorporate Institutional audit, mid-cycle follow-up, collaborative provision audit, IQER, handling Causes for Concern and any other programmes that may be specified in Part B.
- b. Identifies, and provides commentary on, the main themes and trends arising from these activities, and the inferences that may be drawn from them about the state of, and trends in, quality and standards in higher education.
- c. Provides commentary on relevant developments to the Academic Infrastructure.
- d. For IQER, Institutional audit and mid-cycle follow up, includes a "Report on Evaluations", being a report on institutions', contract reviewers', review co-ordinators', auditors' and (where applicable) subject specialist reviewers' evaluation of IQER, mid-cycle follow ups and audit visits undertaken in the preceding academic year. As well as evaluating the process, the report should assess the effectiveness and value of the review method as it is perceived by the institutions reviewed as well as the reviewers, in relation to the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards.
- e. Distinguishes between different groups of HEIs and different groups of FECs, using such categories as may be relevant for the purpose.
- f. Makes recommendations with a view to future action, by HE providers, QAA, HEFCE or other relevant parties, to sustain and improve quality and standards, and address any weaknesses.
- g. Provide a summary and overview of quality enhancement activity undertaken with the sector and other relevant bodies, and the work of the QAA development and enhancement group.'

1.4 QAA's contract with HEFCE includes the activities of Institutional audit and Collaborative provision audit, the review of directly-funded higher education provision in further education colleges, and the development and piloting of the Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) method for higher education in further education colleges. In addition, QAA has responsibility for the development and maintenance of various UK-wide frameworks that underpin the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards within the higher education sector. We call the frameworks the Academic Infrastructure.

1.5 Another significant area of QAA's work is support for the development and enhancement of the quality of provision in UK higher education. The Development and Enhancement Group promotes the understanding of academic standards and quality in UK higher education and the methods used for their assurance. This is achieved by developing within higher education and its stakeholders, a shared understanding and acknowledgement of the basis and the validity of academic standards and quality, and the processes for their assurance and their reporting.

1.6 In 2008, the QAA Causes for Concern process was revised to include complaints from the public. During 2008-09, QAA handled 34 new Cause for Concern cases, of which 32 were raised by members of the public. It is envisaged that this will continue to be a growing area of QAA's work.

1.7 Other aspects of QAA's work, such as overseas audit, the management of the Access to HE courses scheme, and applications for degree awarding powers and university title, are not referenced specifically in this report, although some generic issues arising from the full range of review activity are included. The report does not include reference to privately funded institutions that subscribe to QAA.

1.8 This is an evaluative report based largely on published information and internal QAA documents. It brings together data on the number of events conducted over the period with an overview of outcomes and a commentary on method. In accordance with its established practices, QAA has conducted evaluations of its activities over the previous year, and the outcomes of these and selected quotes from participants are also included within this report.

1.9 Based upon review activity during 2008-09, QAA has published a number of reports reflecting on the outcomes of its processes. These also form part of the evidence base for this evaluation.

Summary of outcomes

1.10 QAA conducted 40 Institutional audits during 2008-09 (see Appendix 1). Three of these audits were combined with Degree awarding powers scrutinies. In 37 cases the audit team confirmed confidence in 'the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards' for on-campus provision. In one audit, limited confidence was placed in the likely future management of the academic standards of the institution's collaborative provision, and in another, the judgement of limited confidence applied specifically to standards in relation to taught undergraduate provision.

1.11 One hybrid collaborative provision audit was undertaken. In other cases, where appropriate, collaborative provision was considered within the scope of the Institutional audit. The outcomes of Institutional audit are presented in Section 2.

1.12 During 2008-09, as part of the review of further education colleges using the IQER method, 66 Developmental engagements and 24 Summative reviews were undertaken. Of the 24 Summative reviews, 22 resulted in a 'confidence' judgement for academic standards and 'one limited confidence' judgement was made. One institution received a 'no confidence' judgement in respect of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. In the remaining 23 Summative reviews, a judgement of confidence was made in respect of the quality of learning opportunities. In 23 of the 24 Summative reviews, the review team concluded that reliance could be placed on public information. In only one review the team considered that reliance could not be placed on public information. The outcomes of IQER are presented in section 3.

1.13 The Developmental engagements confirmed that colleges display a strong commitment to enhancing the higher education they deliver. There was much good practice identified within colleges through the 66 Developmental engagements and 24 Summative reviews. Four colleges received recommendations for improvement through their Developmental engagement that were categorised as essential, and a further two colleges received essential recommendations through the Summative review process. The findings of the reviews are described in Section 3.

1.14 A bespoke report was produced for HEFCE in September 2009, which reported on the findings from QAA's review activity in respect of the quality and standards of Foundation Degrees. The evidence from IQER Developmental engagements and Summative reviews to date indicates that Foundation Degrees are generally well designed and fit for purpose and that the arrangements for managing and ensuring the quality and standards of the Foundation Degrees in the institutions reviewed are operating successfully. In addition, in December 2008, QAA reported to Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) on the outcomes of an evaluation of the FDF Foundation Degree Endorsement Service. Foundation degrees are considered in Section 4.

1.15 Various examples of good practice in relation to postgraduate provision were identified in Institutional audit. A specific example included academic support provided for postgraduate research students. The recommendations focused on ensuring that those students with teaching responsibilities were provided with the appropriate training.

1.16 The evidence presented through QAA review activities confirms the conclusions from previous years that institutions have in place appropriate mechanisms to assure the standards and quality of provision of higher education programmes. There is also a strong commitment to enhancement across the sector and the outcomes of the various review activities identify numerous examples of good practice in the delivery of learning opportunities. The majority of reviews have resulted in judgements of confidence in academic standards and learning opportunities.

1.17 The overall outcomes of both audits and reviews are based on the measured peer evaluation of teams and reflect the overall assessment of all aspects of academic standards and quality. Specific areas for improvement are identified in the text of reports and monitored through the continuing engagements between institutions and QAA.

Thematic enquiries

1.18 During 2008-09, QAA conducted a series of enquiries in response to public concerns about higher education raised in the media. This is supported and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and known as 'Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England'. See section 5 for further information.

1.19 The work focused on five areas:

- student workload and contact hours
- English language requirements for international students
- recruitment practices for international students
- the use of external examiners
- assessment practices.

1.20 The published final report suggests that there are some areas which would benefit from further work:

- the range of contact hours appropriate to the student learning experience
- guidance offered to international students about UK higher education and the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher education institutions
- processes used to identify, train and support external examiners
- the assessment and degree classification practices used by higher education institutions
- effective ways of informing the general public about academic standards and quality in higher education and the ways they are assured.

Emerging themes

1.21 Through the peer evaluation of quality and standards in higher education in England, review and audit teams identified extensive good practice and made recommendations to institutions and colleges in respect of areas for development or improvement. However, a common theme to emerge from the activities was the need for greater consistency within institutions in relation to the processes in place for the management of quality and standards, practices within institutions and the provision of material for students. The emerging findings from audit and review activities highlight the following themes.

1.22 **Information.** Examples of good practice were identified in respect of the information provided to students through course handbooks, module guides and other sources. However, in some cases it was considered that the information made available to students could be improved, to ensure clear articulation of intended learning outcomes, assessment strategies and arrangements for the submission of work for assessment and general information relating to programmes of study and wider student related policies and procedures.

1.23 It was also suggested that greater use could be made of **management information** in review, monitoring and planning. There was limited information derived through QAA's investigations about how the outcomes of the National Student Survey are being used by institutions in informing their quality assurance, monitoring and enhancement activities at institutional or school level.

1.24 Extensive good practice was identified across institutions and colleges regarding the arrangements in place for the **management of quality and standards**. This also extended to the partnership arrangements in place between colleges and their awarding bodies. However, in some cases, recommendations highlighted scope for improvement in the existing arrangements, through increased clarification and the tightening up of policies, procedures and agreements.

1.25 There was much good practice identified in relation to the ways in which institutions and colleges were effectively **engaging with industry and employers**. Specific examples of good practice include employer involvement in curriculum design and assessment. However, this was also an area identified for improvement through the recommendations. The value of employer and industry links in the design and delivery of programmes is pertinent to the provision of vocationally relevant programmes which align with industry/employment skill requirements.

1.26 Many examples of good practice in **student support** were also identified. However, there was suggestion through audit there should be formal training for postgraduate students engaged in teaching activities.

1.27 A notable feature of QAA's activities over the last three years has been support for greater **student engagement**. Notable developments during 2008-09 included the policy decision to recruit student members of audit teams. The first students will participate as a full member of audit teams during 2009-10 audits. In addition, QAA hosted and contributed to a number of national events focusing on student engagement in quality and standards, and worked with students in the development of supporting material for students in preparing for audit and review. A significant outcome of QAA's work on student engagement was the production of a series of video podcasts posted in QAA website. The video podcasts were aimed at providing students with information about the work of QAA, audit and review, and provide support for their preparations for audit and review. See Section 6 for further information.

1.28 Through the **evaluation** of audit and review activities, QAA confirmed that those involved in the process, either as a reviewer or auditor, or as a representative of an institution or college, considered that the method of review was fit for purpose and that the review had achieved its aim. Benefits of the audit and review activities were identified for institutions and students (see Section 8).

Response to Select Committee's report

1.29 In October 2009, QAA published its response to the House of Commons Select Committee's report, describing it as an important and thought-provoking contribution to the debate on the future of higher education in England (www.qaa.ac.uk/news/media/IUSSresponse.pdf).

The future

1.30 In light of the findings of the Select Committee report and the recently published *Higher ambitions* paper, QAA acknowledges the increasing importance of the public facing nature of its role, and the need to reflect upon the nature of information made available publicly regarding quality and standards in UK higher education, to inform learner choice and to satisfy the requirements of accountability.

1.31 Through the current consultation on the future arrangements for the assurance of the quality and standards in higher education, QAA is seeking to ensure that any resulting audit process is fit for purpose, and will lead to greater convergence of the methods of review for higher education provision across the diverse landscape of higher education providers.

2 Institutional audit

2.1 Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the UK's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

2.2 Institutional audit balances the need for publicly credible, independent and rigorous scrutiny of institutions with the recognition that the institutions themselves are best placed to provide stakeholders with valid, reliable and up-to-date information about the academic standards of their awards and the quality of their educational provision. Institutional audit encourages institutions to be self-evaluative, and is therefore a process that, in itself, offers opportunities for enhancement of institutional management of standards and quality.

2.3 QAA began the current cycle of Institutional audit in 2006-07. The method had been revised, following the recommendations of the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group (QAFRG) set out in *HEFCE 2005/35*. The *Handbook for Institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2009*¹ documents the revised process.

2.4 During 2008-09, 40 Institutional audits were undertaken (see Appendix 1). Three of the audits were combined with a joint Degree awarding powers scrutiny visit. In addition, one audit was a hybrid (collaborative audit/audit) visit. All audits were subject to evaluation in accordance with normal QAA processes.

What we found

2.5 In 37 of the 40 audits, the audit teams confirmed confidence in 'the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards' for on-campus provision. In one instance a limited confidence judgement was made, and in a further two cases, there was a split judgement. In one audit, limited confidence was placed in the likely future management of the academic standards of the institution's taught undergraduate awards (confidence was placed in postgraduate awards), and in a further audit, the judgement of limited confidence applied to standards only in relation to collaborative provision.

1

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/handbook2009/InstitutionalAuditHandbook2009.pdf.

	Institution's present and likely future management of academic standards & awards	Institution's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities
Confidence	37	38
Limited confidence	1	0
Split judgement	2	2

N=40

Table 1: Institutional audit (2008-09)

2.6 In 38 audits, the audit team confirmed confidence in 'the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students'. In two instances a split judgement was recorded, in both cases, the limited confidence judgement was made in respect of collaborative provision. In all 40 audits, examples of good practice were recorded by the audit team.

2.7 The primary areas of good practice identified through the audits related to student support, learning and teaching, staff development, management information and student representation and feedback from students.

2.8 As in previous years, arrangements for student support were highlighted as examples of **good practice** in over half of the audits (23). Around one-fifth of all good practice identified was related to student support arrangements. Examples included the role of student advisers and the academic and pastoral support available through specific centres and departments within institutions. Particular reference was made in respect of the support provided for postgraduate students, through supervision arrangements and training and development opportunities.

2.9 Eleven institutions were cited as displaying good practice in terms of learning and teaching. Examples included the centrality of research-informed teaching to teaching and learning and the development of the curriculum. Other examples focused on strategic approaches to teaching and learning and the diversity of pedagogical initiatives and methods employed.

2.10 Student engagement was another area which was identified in 12 audits. It was evident that institutions continued to take steps to improve the arrangements for student engagement in matters pertaining to quality and standards. Good practice examples included coordinated approaches to student engagement and representation, with effective mechanisms in place for gathering feedback from students.

2.11 Nine institutions recorded examples of good practice in relation to staff development. This focused on the range of opportunities provided for staff development across institutions. Examples also included the opportunity afforded to staff in respect of support for research and scholarly activity.

2.12 Audit teams also made a series of **recommendations** for action for institutions, arising from their investigations. In the main, the recommendations made by the audit teams were based around:

- the internal process for quality assurance, namely approval, monitoring and review
- the provision of training for postgraduate research students with teaching responsibilities (15 audits)
- arrangements for the managing and monitoring of collaborative provision (13 audits)
- assessment strategies and policies, in ensuring comparability in standards and consistency in application across the institution, including partner colleges (10 institutions)
- the opportunities available to students to provide feedback and be involved in student representation, as part of the institutions approach to quality and standards (9 audits) and that student representatives have access to full external examiners reports (4 audits)
- the use of management information in planning and internal review and monitoring processes (7 audits)
- the need to ensure alignment with specific sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (8 audits).

2.13 Fifteen audits made explicit reference to postgraduate research students in the recommendations. In the main, recommendations focused upon the need to ensure all postgraduate students with supervisory or teaching responsibilities are trained appropriately (11 audits), equipping them to undertake the role. This reflected a key area of recommendation to emerge from the 2007-08 audits.

2.14 Reference was made to collaborative partners and the arrangements in respect of collaborative provision in 13 of the audits. Recommendations focused upon approval arrangements for collaborative partnerships, policies and procedures and roles and responsibilities in relation to collaborative partnership. Greater clarity and consistency was recommended in respect of the arrangements in place for monitoring and review activities.

2.15 Where the audit team concluded that only limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards, the associated 'essential' recommendations included the following:

- develop a process, with the least possible delay, whereby courses are unable to commence without a valid legal agreement in place
- ensure that the recommendation made in the previous audit report, that periodic review be undertaken at regular intervals and that there should be a contribution from external peers that is always critical and robust, is addressed fully; and ensure that the overriding responsibility for the procedure, nature and timing of the periodic review process is determined by Academic Board or an appropriate subcommittee
- ensure that, in reaching assessment board decisions, the regulatory framework is applied consistently, and judgements do not undermine the University's assurance of the standards of its taught undergraduate awards
- in order to eliminate ambiguity about the nature and standing of its taught undergraduate awards, review the nomenclature and status of those awards

that fall outside the scope of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) but which nonetheless use its terminology

- urgently set a clear timetable for ensuring that all collaborative provision has an appropriate legal agreement in place in order to safeguard the students' interests.

Outcomes of the evaluations

2.16 In accordance with normal QAA evaluation practices, the audits were subject to evaluation. The questionnaire used to support evaluation was amended to make the evaluation more focused on supporting continuous improvement and identifying strengths and challenges in the method and benefits to stakeholder groups.

Role	Number sent	Number returned	Response rate
Auditor	156	149	96%
Audit Secretary	39	35	90%
Institution	37	16	43%
TOTAL	232	200	86%

*Due to an administrative error, no evaluation questionnaires were sent for one audit. All figures are based on responses from 39 audits.

Table 2: response rates

2.17 Comments have been received from audit teams and higher education institutions. The vast majority of auditors and audit secretaries completed an evaluation questionnaire following their audit and 16 institutions have returned completed questionnaires. Overall, the findings from the evaluations were very positive. Audit teams and institutions overwhelmingly agreed that the audit had achieved its aims.

Percentage of respondents that agree that the audit achieved its aim:

Auditor - 97 per cent

Audit Secretary - 94 per cent

Institution - 100 per cent

2.18 Overall, the evaluations revealed that audit teams and institutions were generally satisfied with the Institutional audit process. There were, however, some areas that were highlighted by respondents as areas where improvements could be made. The institution's briefing paper and the students' written submission remained as the areas of the audit process that were identified as being slightly problematic for the audit teams. In some cases, the institution's briefing paper was not considered to be sufficiently evaluative and the indexes to the briefing papers did not always provide sufficient reference to existing documentation. In respect of the students' written submission, there was a perception that the documents were not sufficiently analytical, and as such, were felt to be only partially useful as a source of evidence. These areas continue to receive the lowest number of 'good' or 'yes' responses on the evaluation questionnaires, but this year there has been a decrease in the number of 'poor' or 'no' responses.

2.19 Key findings from the evaluation:

- communication with QAA is good and the *Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2009* is clear and useful to the auditors and institutions
- the training is informative, effective and useful
- team members and institutions feel that the process works well and achieves its aim
- there is room for improvement in the institutional briefing papers and student written submissions. These documents are not always evaluative.

2.20 Respondents identified a series of benefits for the institution as a result of the audit. These included:

'It encourages self-reflection, but also gives the opportunity for improvements to be suggested'.

'Provides an opportunity for reflection'.

'A peer review of their processes and procedures which is independent'.
'Focus on their own management of quality and standards'.

'Gaining an external viewpoint and ideas for improvement'.

'An expression of confidence is recorded in the public domain. Recognition of good practice/areas of strength. Additional leverage to support institutional improvements'.

2.21 Respondents identified a series of benefits for the students as a direct result of the audit. These included:

'The audit reinforces to students that their view is important and that there is confidence in the standards of their degrees'.

'They can be confident of award standards. They become aware that there is external validation of standards and quality'.

'Opportunity for dialogue with institution. Making the student voice heard'.
'Provides an opportunity to make an input'.

2.22 In addition, students who participated in the audit process were also invited to provide feedback on their experience. Following each audit, an evaluation questionnaire was sent to the Students' Union and the QA contact at the institution for dissemination to those students who were involved in the process in some way. A total of 87 questionnaires were returned, from students involved in audits at 23 institutions.

2.23 Respondents considered that the information provided to students was generally good, but considered that the Handbook could be clearer regarding student involvement in the audit process and the guide could be more useful in terms of writing the student written submission.

2.24 In relation to the preparation of student written submissions, the main challenges identified were the length of time it takes, the timing of the submission and getting engagement from the wider student body. The most common methods of data collection to inform the submission were focus groups and bespoke surveys.

2.25 Students generally regarded the communication throughout the audit as good. The meetings with audit teams were good and the majority of respondents considered that they had their expectations fulfilled and felt that their views had been taken on board. However, it was suggested that the meetings might be more beneficial if they were longer and more informal.

2.26 Respondents generally believed that changes would occur at their institution as a result of the audit. Those involved in the process felt that their involvement had strengthened existing connections and engagement with the institution. The primary benefit of student engagement in the process, however, was considered to be getting the student voice heard by both the institution and QAA.

2.27 Comments offered by student respondents regarding the impact of their involvement in the audit process through the preparation of the student written submission and/or meetings with audit teams included:

'Looking at the previous audit - the findings have influenced the university's policy and efforts over the last few years, it seems likely the same will occur following the publication of this audit'.

'Through my personal experience, the university always respects constructive opinion to improve the operation of the institution'.

'I felt that...staff took the audit very seriously due to their level of preparation and so I would fully expect them to act on any recommendations made by the QAA report'.

'Changes already being made in response to the student feedback in the SWS and the University is anxious to enhance the student experience'.

2.28 Helpful comments were offered by the students to improve student involvement in audit from preparing the student written submission (SWS), through meeting with the audit team as part of the visit and receiving the findings and subsequent actions to arise from the audit report.

2.29 On the basis of feedback received through the student evaluations, QAA has improved guidance and supporting materials for the preparation of the student written submission and general information about student involvement in audit. QAA has also continued to work closely with other partners to support students in participating in the audit process, recognising their centrality to the quality assurance and enhancement of the learning experience within their own institution. See section 6 for further information on QAA's work with students.

Summary

2.30 Overall, the audits confirmed the high standards of higher education provision in HEIs within England. Extensive good practice was identified by audit teams. In total, across the 40 audits, 180 examples of good practice were recorded. Likewise, teams identified areas for attention and/or development, making a series of recommendations for action to the institutions.

2.31 Only one of the 40 audits recorded limited confidence and essential recommendations in respect of the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards. A further two recorded a split judgement of confidence/limited confidence. Recommendations made by teams primarily focused upon the need to ensure greater consistency within institutions in relation to the processes in place for the management of standards, collaborative arrangements and training for postgraduate research students with teaching responsibilities.

2.32 Many examples of good practice were identified by audit teams in relation to the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Specific examples of good practice identified included:

- the arrangements for student support
- approaches to teaching and learning
- the mechanism in place for student engagement, representation and gathering feedback
- staff development opportunities.

2.33 The audits confirmed that, in the main, the quality and standards of the higher education programmes delivered were sound. The evaluation confirmed that the audit process was working well in practice and had achieved its aims. All respondent groups identified multiple benefits for the institution and the students as a direct result of the audit process.

2.34 QAA has continued to develop its work in relation to student involvement. QAA has supported and contributed to the Quality Matters events, held in conjunction with the National Union of Students (NUS) and other organisations. In addition, QAA has continued to engage with students and develop a series of materials with the explicit aim of informing and supporting students in preparation for audit.

2.35 QAA has responded to the desire to have greater student involvement in the audit process and has recruited and trained student members of audit teams. The first student members of audit teams will be deployed in 2009-10 audits (see Section 6).

The future

2.36 In December 2009, a consultation was launched to inform future arrangements for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The consultation is being undertaken by Universities UK, GuildHE and the HE funding bodies for England and Northern Ireland.

2.37 We are currently awaiting the outcome of this and other external reviews in order to propose an operational description of a successor audit method, which the sector will then have an opportunity to comment on. Currently this consultation is scheduled provisionally for autumn 2010. While thinking on the new process is in the preliminary stages, the principles behind the method will include a greater emphasis of auditing against the academic infrastructure; greater opportunities for the views of students in institutions to be heard in the audit; more intelligible and audience-friendly reporting; greater engagement with the institution during the audit process; and the inclusion of the provision of public information as a significant part of the audit.

3 Review of higher education provision in further education colleges

3.1 Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) is the first QAA review method to be developed specifically for higher education in further education colleges. The overarching aims of IQER are to:

- support colleges in evaluating and improving their management of their higher education, for the benefit of students, and within the context of their agreements with awarding bodies
- foster good working relationships between colleges and their awarding bodies, for the benefit of students
- enable HEFCE to discharge its statutory responsibility for ensuring that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided by the institutions it funds
- provide public information.

3.2 The outcomes and approach are similar to Institutional audit so that public information is available in a similar form for reviews of higher education in higher education colleges and further education colleges.

3.3 IQER reports on three core themes: academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, and public information. The review method involves two related processes: Developmental engagement and Summative review. The Developmental engagements have a development and enhancement focus. The report is not published but is made available to HEFCE and to the college and its awarding bodies. It is intended to aid the college in developing capacity to manage quality assurance. Summative review reports include judgements on the core themes and are published on the QAA website.

3.4 This peer review process is planned to take place over a five-year cycle. All colleges will have a Summative review, and most will have one Developmental engagement. Some colleges will have a second Developmental engagement because they meet one or more of the risk criteria set out in the IQER handbook (paragraph 96) and there is provision in the method for colleges with low enrolments (fewer than 100 full-time equivalents funded by HEFCE) to opt out of a Developmental engagement.

3.5 Developmental engagements are intended to support colleges in reviewing and improving the management of their higher education provision, for the benefit of students. They foster good working relationships between colleges and awarding bodies, for the benefit of students, and within the context of the colleges' agreements with their awarding bodies. Developmental engagements result in evaluation rather than judgements, and the report is not published. An action plan resulting from the

Developmental engagement is included within the report, and forms part of the evidence base for the subsequent Summative review.

3.6 During 2008-09, QAA undertook 66 Development engagements and 24 Summative reviews. Due to the small size of provision on colleges, 4 of the Summative reviews were desk-based and did not include a formal review visit to the college.

What we found

3.7 Developmental engagements do not result in a judgement. In Summative review, however, judgments are made on academic standards, learning opportunities and public information. Of the 24 Summative reviews, 22 resulted in a 'confidence' judgement for academic standards and 'one limited confidence' judgement was made. One institution received a 'no confidence' judgement in respect of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. In the remaining 23 Summative reviews, a judgement of confidence was made in respect of the quality of learning opportunities (Table 3).

3.8 In 23 of the 24 Summative reviews, the review team concluded that reliance could be placed on public information. In only one review the team considered that reliance could not be placed on public information (Table 3).

	Judgement on Academic Standards	Judgement on Quality of Learning Opportunities	Public Information
Confidence	22	23	
Limited confidence	1		
No confidence	1	1	
Reliance			23
No reliance			1

Table 3 Outcomes of Summative reviews
N=24

3.9 Through the 66 Developmental engagements, 480 examples of good practice in assessment were identified by the review team. All Developmental engagements resulted in at least one feature of good practice being identified by the team. Within the context of IQER, good practice is defined as:

practice that the IQER team regards as making a particularly positive contribution to the college's management of academic standards and/or academic quality in the context of that particular college; and which is worthy of wider dissemination within and/or beyond the college.

3.10 One of the primary areas of good practice identified through the Developmental engagements and Summative reviews related to the provision of information for staff, students and employers. Handbooks and programme information provided to students were deemed to contain useful information in relation to the arrangements for assessment, programmes/units of study, learning outcomes and other material pertinent to students.

3.11 In just under half of the Developmental engagements, examples of good practice were identified in respect of the feedback provided to students on summative and formative assessments (28 colleges). Examples of feedback were considered to be varied, innovative and timely.

3.12 In relation to staff development, 27 examples of good practice were identified through the Developmental engagements (24 colleges) and a further 18 through the Summative reviews for staff development (14 colleges).

3.13 There was much good practice identified through the Developmental engagements in relation to the use made of virtual learning environment (VLEs). The way in which VLEs were being used to provide information to students on assessment and other matters pertaining to study, and for providing feedback on assessments, was repeatedly identified as an area of good practice.

3.14 Throughout the Developmental engagements, there was much good practice identified in relation to the range of and innovative assessment methods. Additionally, the involvement of employers in the design, delivery and assessment of the curriculum was also identified. Thirteen colleges received good practice in relation to the direct involvement of employers in the assessment process. Involvement of employers in the curriculum was considered to ensure the vocational relevance of the provision and support sector skills needs.

3.15 Other areas of good practice to emerge included:

- approaches to teaching and learning
- assessment strategies and associated policies and procedures
- academic and pastoral support for students
- strong and effective relationships between the college and awarding body(ies)
- internal processes for the maintenance and assurance of quality and standards, through approval, validation, monitoring and review arrangements.

3.16 Review teams also made a series of recommendations for action by colleges. These recommendations are graded as desirable, advisable and essential, and are subsequently used to inform the action plan for the college resulting from the Developmental engagement. Four colleges received an essential recommendation as a result of their Developmental engagement and three colleges received essential recommendations as a result of their Summative review.

3.17 One of the primary areas upon which the recommendations focused was in relation to the provision of information, typically for students. Specific issues cited by the review teams included the need to:

- provide clear programme/module handbooks for students, with consideration to consistency in handbooks across an institution
- provide students with sufficient information about assessments, detailing the grade criteria
- provide clear information for students about the link between assessment and intended learning outcomes
- ensure that programme related information is made publicly available.

3.18 As with previous years, feedback to students on the outcomes of assessment also repeatedly emerged as an area for action by some colleges (and was demonstrated through the results of the National Student Survey). Specific reference was made to the consistency, timeliness, quality and usefulness of feedback. In a number of cases, it was suggested that standard feedback forms or templates could be developed and used consistently across the colleges' higher education provision.

3.19 Through the recommendations, references were made to the Academic Infrastructure in respect of 20 colleges. In particular, reviewers considered that colleges should ensure engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and ensure that procedures align with the *Code of practice*.

3.20 Other recommendations made by review teams included the need to:

- implement and review VLEs, where appropriate
- increase opportunities for engagement with employers in curriculum design, delivery and assessment
- provide information for current and potential students
- ensure appropriate opportunities for staff development activities and the sharing of good practice
- ensure consistency in the arrangements in place for listening to the student voice.

3.21 Four colleges received essential recommendations following their Developmental engagements. These were:

- to ensure that learning outcomes are included on degree and HNC feedback sheets
- the extensive use of the virtual learning environment to provide accurate public information on assessment in the form of handbooks and assignment briefs and the prompt updating of the information following approvals and changes to programmes
- to raise the profile and use of AP(E)L to encourage potential students to join the programmes
- to review and improve its overall systems for managing its responsibilities in relation to assessment such that students demonstrably achieve all relevant validated learning outcomes to obtain an assignment or module Pass and that procedures are in place to ensure awarding body regulations and interpretations of the Academic Infrastructure relating to assessment are fully understood.

3.22 Two colleges received essential recommendations following their Summative review. These were:

- to establish a more explicit, transparent and systematic approach to its management of the higher education provision
- to review its management of academic standards and quality to ensure that an effective means exists to act on the advice offered by the awarding body and the external examiner.

Outcomes of the evaluations

3.23 Overall, the IQER **Developmental engagement** process was well received by colleges, awarding bodies and students. Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed that the Developmental engagement had achieved its aim. The process was generally deemed to have operated smoothly, and respondents welcomed the fact it was supportive and enhancement-focused. All respondent groups identified a series of benefits for the college, the awarding body(ies) and students as a direct result of IQER.

3.24 Benefits to the college, as identified by respondents included:

- a chance to address any issues that may need action before summative review
- an opportunity to focus on HE provision within a much larger FE provision and an opportunity to develop a strong sense of identity among HE staff to develop mechanisms for the spread of good practice
- an opportunity to scrutinise their own QA processes from 'outside the college' perspective'
- assistance with the harmonisation of procedures and documentation across the college.

3.25 Benefits to awarding bodies, as identified by respondents included:

- confirmation that appropriate quality and standards are being maintained in partner institutions
- an opportunity to gain new perspectives on the partners role and responsibilities and the challenges they face
- an opportunity to show support for partners.

3.26 Benefits to students, as identified by respondents included:

- an opportunity for students to have their say beyond normal internal processes
- an opportunity for students to develop their ability to analyse the quality of their programmes. Improves their self-confidence and gives them a sense of ownership of their programmes
- a more developed identity as a group of HE students, more commonality in the college's management of their courses
- ensuring students are satisfied with the evaluation process of their work and make sure a dialogue is maintained between staff and students.

3.27 In addition to the 66 Developmental engagements, there were a further 24 **Summative reviews** undertaken. These were also well received; with much positive comment about the benefits of the interaction. Ninety-two per cent of respondents agreed that the review achieved its aim.

3.28 Benefits to the college, as identified by respondents included:

- gives the college an overview of its quality systems and how effective they are
- ensure senior management engage more directly in management of HE within institutions
- provide a milestone for development and future progress and action planning
- provides an opportunity for staff to articulate their effective practices.

3.29 Benefits to awarding bodies, as identified by respondents included:

- assures them that these programmes are 'fit for purpose' but can also expose any gaps in their relationship with the FE college that need attention
- gives a college-wide view of the HE provision
- an opportunity to strengthen the working relationship with the college.
- an opportunity to consider afresh the potential for collaborative staff development arrangements.

3.30 Benefits to students, as identified by respondents included:

- the possibility of improvements, often quite quickly
- they feel heard and their needs are acknowledged
- they have the benefit of confirmation that their views are valued in and beyond the college through their engagement with the process and the opportunity to feedback to an external agency.

3.31 Challenges identified through the evaluation included:

For the college

- the demands upon the college staff and their workloads
- ensuring effective interaction with the colleges' awarding body(ies)
- enabling effective communication between the FE and HE management in the college
- understanding the IQER process.

For the students

- being able to submit an effective and informative student written submission
- ensuring that students are involved in the review process

For awarding body(ies)

- ensuring that the relevant staff are able to attend IQER meetings, especially if the awarding body is involved in more than one ongoing IQER review at the same time
- providing effective support for the college.

3.32 Other challenges expressed in respect of the IQER process included:

- HE management's understanding of IQER within the college
- meeting deadlines from QAA and the availability of staff time in preparation for the review
- securing student input
- enhancing and clarifying the awarding body(ies) and college's working relationship in respect of IQER.

Summary

3.33 The 66 Developmental engagements and Summative reviews undertaken as part of IQER identified much good practice and areas for development. The main items include:

- feedback to students on the outcomes of assessed work, in relation to quality, timeliness and usefulness
- staff development opportunities
- the use of VLEs for information sharing and providing feedback to students
- engagement with employers
- the provision of information to students about their programme of study, in particular the arrangements for assessment, to include schedules, and grade descriptors.

3.34 The evaluation confirmed that IQER was operating effectively. All participant groups identified a series of benefits to the college, awarding bodies and students as a result of both Developmental engagements and Summative reviews.

The future

3.35 The current cycle of IQER draws to a close in 2012. In planning for the future, liaison is taking place regarding developments in Institutional audit in order to explore possible opportunities for the future convergence of review methods in England.

4 Foundation Degrees

4.1 Foundation Degrees were introduced in September 2001 to enable students to develop the intermediate higher-level skills that characterise the high-quality graduates needed by the labour market. The qualification is located at Intermediate level on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA, and at level 5 of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's National Qualification Framework (NQF).

4.2 Foundation Degrees were also introduced to contribute to widening participation by providing an award that aims to attract learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher-level qualification. Many programmes are designed to meet the needs of local employment markets, although some are targeted at national and international employment needs.

4.3 The specification of Foundation Degree programmes was drawn up initially by the former Department for Education and Skill and has been codified by QAA in its

Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (QAA 2004). This provides details of the scope, structure and organisation of Foundation Degree programmes, including the involvement of employers and opportunities for work-based learning. The statement also identifies the need for progression routes from Foundation Degrees to higher awards at level 6 and above.

4.4 Partnership between employers, higher education institutions, further education colleges and Sector Skills Councils are central to the concept of Foundation Degrees. QAA recognises that, while many Foundation Degree programmes are delivered by a consortium of institutions, some are provided by only one institution which may also be the awarding body. For the purposes of this report, the term 'provider' refers to both of these arrangements.

4.5 The primary responsibility for the academic standards and quality of the students' learning experience rests with the awarding higher education institution. Where the higher education institution is in partnership with a further education college, the college and employers are normally partners in the delivery of a Foundation Degree and share responsibility for the delivery and the quality of the students' learning experience with the higher education institution, but the ultimate responsibility for academic standards rests with the awarding HEI.

4.6 To date, QAA has conducted two special reviews of Foundation Degrees since their introduction in 2001, the first in 2002-03 and the second in 2004-05. Following the reviews, QAA published a report entitled, *Learning from reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004-05*. The report identified a variety of examples of emerging good practice, and made a series of recommendations for the design, delivery and assessment of Foundation Degrees, for consideration by providers and policy makers.

What we found

4.7 The contracts between QAA and HEFCE for 2007-10 require QAA to gather information through review activity on the extent to which Foundation Degrees meet their intended purpose. IQER is the primary method of review through which this information has been collected. A full report on Foundation Degrees was provided to HEFCE by QAA in September 2009.

4.8 The report to HEFCE concluded that the provision of Foundation Degrees has continued to increase in England since their introduction in 2000. There have been annual increases in the number of programmes delivered, student enrolments and the number of colleges and awarding bodies involved in the provision of Foundation Degrees. Recruitment continues to be buoyant and the government target of 100,000 students by 2010 is likely to be met during the current academic year.

4.9 During 2007-09, IQER, supported by Institutional and Collaborative audit, provided a useful vehicle to explore the arrangements in place within colleges. The reviews also illustrated the effectiveness of links with awarding higher education institutions for the quality assurance of Foundation Degrees.

4.10 The findings from the IQER reviews identified 83 examples of good practice in the delivery of Foundation Degrees in 41 colleges. Some scope for improvement and further development was identified over the same period. The IQER Developmental engagement reports for 19 colleges contained 24 recommendations. Only one was considered to be essential and requiring immediate remedial action.

The remaining recommendations identified matters for improvement or enhancement and will be monitored through a review of action plans and ongoing interactions between QAA and colleges.

4.11 The evidence from IQER Developmental engagements and Summative reviews to date indicates that Foundation Degrees are generally well designed and fit for purpose. Many programmes have been developed in new and innovative disciplines reflecting local and regional employer needs, and also in growth sectors of the economy. The development of Foundation Degrees has strengthened colleges' links with employers and between colleges and their higher education partners. They have also been successful in bringing students into higher education from sectors and communities that do not have a tradition of engagement with colleges and universities.

4.12 The reviews concluded that the arrangements for managing and ensuring the quality and standards of the Foundation Degrees in the institutions reviewed are operating successfully. The commentary on Foundation Degrees in review reports indicates the unexceptional nature of programmes in that Foundation Degrees are now well established as part of the suite of higher education awards.

4.13 On the basis of the outcomes of review activities, QAA recommends that the quality and standards of Foundation Degrees continues to be monitored through existing review mechanisms, and where appropriate, specific reference is made to such provision within reports. It is also proposed that QAA continues to monitor the recommendations arising from the *Learning from reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004-05* report (QAA 2005), through the remainder of the IQER and audit cycles. Foundation Degree awarding power scrutinies can provide an additional source of evidence to support and inform ongoing analysis and monitoring.

4.14 In December 2008, QAA reported to FDF on the findings of the external review of the FDF Foundation Degree Endorsement Service, commissioned by FDF. The review concluded that the scheme provides a series of benefits including:

- the quality 'kite marking' of programmes
- the interaction between providers and employers/sector representative bodies in the design and delivery of Foundation Degrees
- external verification of the vocational relevance of the Foundation Degree programme.

Summary

4.15 The QAA review activities, together with the FDF Endorsement Service, provide a rigorous approach to the assurance of the quality and standards of Foundation Degrees, with tangible benefits and outcomes for all of the stakeholder groups. On the basis of the outcomes of review activities, QAA recommends that the quality and standards of Foundation Degrees continue to be monitored through existing review mechanisms, and where appropriate, specific reference is made to such provision within reports.

The future

4.16 QAA also proposes to continue to monitor the recommendations arising from the *Learning from reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004-05* report (QAA 2005), through the remainder of the IQER and Institutional audit cycles.

Foundation Degree awarding power scrutinies can provide an additional source of evidence to support and inform ongoing analysis and monitoring.

4.17 Given the current range of activities for monitoring the delivery of Foundation Degrees and for promoting the enhancement of provision, including the contribution of employers, QAA does not see the need for further special reviews of Foundation Degrees at this stage. The outcomes from the various review activities have confirmed that existing external and internal review and verification processes are effective and widely used. QAA will continue to evaluate provision through its existing review processes.

5 Development and enhancement

5.1 QAA has responsibility for the 'stewardship' of the Academic Infrastructure (AI). The AI is used across the United Kingdom (UK) higher education sector as a set of shared reference points that provide a basis for the setting of academic standards and the management of quality. The concept of an AI is designed to provide a sound and explicit basis for public and specialist confidence in an HE system that is essentially self-regulating.

5.2 The AI has four components; three are mainly concerned with setting standards (*The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), *Subject benchmark statements* and *Programme specifications*)² and one (a *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*)³ is concerned with the management of quality.

5.3 Maintaining and updating the AI is core to the work of QAA. During 2008-09 this activity included:

- reviewing and, if necessary, revising individual components of the Academic Infrastructure, to ensure currency and applicability to evolving and emerging practice in HE
- providing events and publications, mostly for the HE sector, to support and promote the Academic Infrastructure and its effective implementation
- working with stakeholders to ensure that the Academic Infrastructure is understood and used effectively
- undertaking special projects to identify effective quality assurance practices, and support their evolution and innovation; this is done through work both in the UK and in Europe.

² ***The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*** provides a set of generic qualifications descriptors for the main higher education qualifications. It sets out the general expectations about what the main UK degrees and other HE awards represent in terms of the knowledge, understanding and abilities that graduates should possess.

Subject benchmark statements - are written by subject specialists and set out what they consider to be important aspects of university study in their subject areas (disciplines).

Programme specifications - written by each university or college, set out the details of the particular courses offered.

³ the ***Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*** has 10 sections. Each covers a different topic of importance to the management and assurance of key activities associated with academic quality and standards.

Reviewing and revising individual components of the Academic Infrastructure

5.4 The review and revision of the FHEQ involved a substantial amount of work throughout 2007-08. The work on the FHEQ was closely linked to the work of the Credit Issues Development Group (see paragraph 5.8). The FHEQ was the subject of wide-ranging discussions and consultations with the sector and key stakeholders. These discussions reflected the changing contexts of HE since the FHEQ was first published in 2000 and in particular the effects of the Bologna Process on the development of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In addition to a general updating of the FHEQ, the work was also a prelude to a self-certification exercise against the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA (FQ-EHEA). The second edition of the FHEQ was published in August 2008.

5.5 At the request of DIUS, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI), the second edition FHEQ was self-certified against the FQ-EHEA. Report on 'Verification of the compatibility of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* with *The framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA)*' was published in November 2008 and made available on the Bologna Qualifications Frameworks and Council of Europe webpages in February 2009. The verification report contributed to the Bologna 'stocktaking exercise'. The 'stocktaking exercise' charts the progress of EWNl and Scotland against the 'action lines' supporting the Bologna declaration to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010. The outcome of the stocktaking exercise was reported to a meeting of Education Ministers representing each of the Bologna signatory countries in Leuven in April 2009.

5.6 A European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) has been developed by the European Commission and endorsed by ministers in 2008. The Commission's view on the precise relationship between this and the Bologna Process with a different group of countries and its own qualifications framework for HE is not entirely clear. A UK EQF Coordination Group was established in 2008 to oversee the referencing the individual qualification (and credit) frameworks in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland to EQF. QAA was represented on this group and participated in the meetings and working groups established to reference, separately, the QCF and CQFW to EQF.

5.7 At the request of the High Level Policy Forum, QAA convened a working group made up of key stakeholders to consider the merits of referencing the FHEQ (EWNl) to EQF. Following consideration of a report by the working group and the advice of the UK representative on the European Commission EQF Advisory group, the HLPF concluded at its meeting in April 2009 that 'given the lack of perceived additional benefits to HE of referencing the FHEQ to EQF in addition to EHEA, weighed against the potential risks of referencing against a framework and bureaucracy which are still under development, the FHEQ should not, at the present time, be referenced against the EQF.

5.8 Following from the recommendations of the *Measuring and Recording Student Achievement (Burgess) Group*, QAA has supported the *Credit Issues Development Group* in preparing and consulting on a credit framework for HE in England. The *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* and an overview statement, '*The frameworks for higher education qualifications and credit: how they relate to*

academic standards' were both published during August 2008. During 2008-09 QAA also took the opportunity to update the *Straightforward guide to academic credit in HE in England* and revise its webpages containing material specific to credit and qualifications frameworks. In July 2009, at the request of the Burgess Group QAA undertook an online survey of the extent to which HEIs in England have adopted and accepted the HE credit framework for England. The results of the survey were reported to the Burgess group and a report published by QAA.

5.9 The England HE credit framework is based on the same general principles as those in Wales and Scotland, but whereas these credit frameworks are integrated into a general national qualifications and credit frameworks covering all learning, a separate qualifications and credit framework (the QCF) for the reform and regulation of vocational education and training in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been developed. Working through the Joint Forum for Higher Levels QAA has been instrumental to the development of a set of '*Overarching principles and shared operational criteria for a common approach to credit*' between the vocational and HE sectors in England. The 'principles and criteria' were published in January 2009.

5.10 QAA has provided advice and guidance on matters relating to the 'levels' of qualifications, both in comparisons between country's (different) qualifications frameworks through, for example participating in the '5 countries' work to update '*Qualifications can cross boundaries*' a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland. The second edition of the rough guide was published in January 2009. QAA has also provided advice to the 'Burgess group' on the national description of Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that will form a necessary component of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). QAA has also provided clarification on the changes to the second edition FHEQ with regard to the Government policy, in England, on funding 'Equivalent and Lower Qualifications' (ELQ).

5.11 The review and revision of two sections of the *Code of practice, Section 3: Students with disabilities* and *Section 8: Careers advice and guidance* was undertaken in 2008-09. In each case the review and revision has been assisted by an advisory group drawn from across the HE sector and key stakeholders. Following publication of these two sections of the *Code of practice* in 2009-10, all elements of the Academic Infrastructure will be in their second edition.

5.12 In keeping with QAA's remit to ensure the currency and applicability of the AI to evolving and emerging practice in HE we offered, during the latter part of 2007-08, to open discussion with the sector about the necessity of re-visiting *Section 2: (Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning)*. This section was revised in 2004. Section 2 is regarded by some as an impediment to effective employer engagement whilst others view it as an important document for those institutions establishing collaborative arrangements particularly with partner institutions outside of the UK. Activities undertaken via the Institutional and subject centre liaison schemes in 2008-09 have helped inform the decision about whether to proceed with a further revision of this section in 2009-10 in addition to a broader evaluation of the AI (see paragraphs 5.19-5.21).

5.13 Subject benchmarks are written by the relevant subject communities. QAA's work in this area is supported by the Benchmark Steering Group, and falls into three main areas: review and revision of existing statements; recognition of new statements; the relationship between benchmark statements and other reference points used for setting standards and naming awards. An annex to the *Subject benchmark statement* for Mathematics, statistics and operational research to cover integrated master's degrees was published in January 2009. In 2008-09 one new statement (Youth and Community Work) progressed to publication through the Benchmark Recognition Scheme, and a further six new statements are either currently under development or proposals to develop a new benchmark statement are being considered.

5.14 During 2009-10 QAA will review arrangements put into place for promoting the drafting and publication of additional subject benchmark statements. These arrangements - the Benchmark Recognition scheme - were established in 2004 in order to respond positively to an increasing number of requests from a range of subject communities for QAA to support the development of, and/or endorse, new benchmark statements.

5.15 Following previous discussions on the need for master's level benchmark statements, a draft 'master's degree characteristics' document was produced during 2008 with the help of an external development group. This document will be subject to formal consultation in 2009-10. The document will not be an integral part of the AI but will offer additional guidance to the master's qualification descriptor of the FHEQ. Similarly, in 2008-09 QAA was invited to lead a multi-agency (UKCGE, HEA, UUK, RCUK, HEFCE and Vitae) 'UK doctoral characteristics project'. The project is designed to clarify the nature and characteristics of doctoral qualifications, in particular professional doctorates. A project group has been established and will report in 2009-10.

5.16 During the course of 2008-09, meetings were held with various professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to discuss concerns over external recognition of UK qualifications under the 'Bologna' process. The first was with representatives of medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, and the second was with representatives of chemistry, physics, maths and engineering. For medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, a decision was reached to identify that these long first degrees should be included in the second edition FHEQ at level 7 (see paragraph 5.4).

5.17 The Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Group (the 'Burgess group') has for some time been working on papers with the aim of providing proposals 'to build and implement a sustainable system for recording achievement that is fit for purpose in the 21st century. The final report of the 'Burgess group' *'Beyond the honours degree classification'* recommended that the development of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) should take place alongside the commitments made by QAA and partners to review and revise the personal development planning (PDP) element of the *Guidelines for higher education Progress Files*.

5.18 The review and revision of the Personal Development Planning element of the *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* was completed in 2008-09. QAA convened a multi-stakeholder working group to update the guidance offered to institutions about implementing and supporting Personal Development Planning. The second edition

Personal Development Planning: Guidance for institutional policy and practice in higher education was published in February 2009.

Providing events and publications to support and promote the Academic Infrastructure and its effective implementation

5.19 The Academic Infrastructure (AI) was developed to provide a set of shared and explicit reference points that would provide a basis for setting, and setting out, the academic standards of HE awards and also provide a means for the internal and external quality assurance of those standards and the quality of the study programmes leading to the awards.

5.20 While evidence on the applicability and effectiveness of the AI can be gleaned from thematic scrutiny of audit and review reports (through for example the *Outcomes...* papers, see paragraphs 5.22-5.26) and from the discussions and consultations associated with the ongoing programme of review and revision of the various components of the AI, and other 'intelligence gathering', a formal evaluation of the AI as a whole has not yet been undertaken. With a continuously evolving HE context it was decided that such a review should be undertaken, and began in 2008-09.

5.21 Analysis of existing data sources began in 2008-09 and was supplemented by specific projects to gain the views of staff working in different roles within Institutions and QAA staff of the utility and effectiveness of the AI. These projects assisted in the detailed design and implementation of what will be a major UK wide project. It is anticipated that this will inform any necessary or desirable revisions to the bases and procedures used setting out and securing the standards and quality of UK HE and will proceed in 2009-10 in parallel with the development of a revised Quality Assurance Framework, a new operational description for Institutional Audit in England and Northern Ireland. An outline project plan was shared with stakeholders in July 2009.

5.22 During 2008-09, QAA continued to use the intelligence derived from Institutional audit to support quality enhancement and improvement. Eight Series 2 papers were published in 2008-09 and will continue in 2009-10. *Outcomes...* papers published in 2008-09 included:

Title

<i>Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies</i>	August 2008
<i>Institutions' support for e-learning</i>	August 2008
<i>Programme monitoring arrangements</i>	October 2008
<i>Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degree programmes</i>	November 2008
<i>Staff support and development arrangements</i>	November 2008
<i>Student representation and feedback</i>	February 2009

5.23 During 2008-09 revised publishing arrangements for *Outcomes...* papers were introduced. The publication of new *Outcomes...* and related papers on QAA's web pages were prefaced by the publication of a Circular letter to heads of subscribing bodies, representative bodies and other stakeholders one week before the publication date. The Circular letter gave the title of the paper(s) and a brief summary of key findings. The intention was that through the recipients, institutions would be better informed about the relevance of the findings of QAA's Institutional audits for aspects of their own quality and academic standards arrangements and their learning support arrangements.

5.24 One of the aims of *Outcomes from institutional audit* is to provide an opportunity to reflect on changing circumstances in higher education in England and Northern Ireland as shown in recently published Institutional audit reports. As such, '*Outcomes...*' papers frequently raises questions for others as well as for QAA. During 2008-09 QAA also established, with UUK and GuildHE a 'Quality Forum'. The group comprised representatives of UUK/GuildHE, QAA and senior figures representative of the UK HE sector. The purpose and remit of the group was to provide a opportunity for QAA to discuss with key representatives of the HE sector emerging quality assurance issues and concerns, including early notification of trends identified from *Outcomes...* papers.

5.25 Draft papers in *Outcomes from collaborative provision audit* were received in the latter part of 2008-09. This series of papers will be published from spring 2010. It is based on the collaborative provision audits conducted by QAA in England and Northern Ireland between 2004 and 2007 and papers will broadly follow the approach taken in the *Outcomes from institutional audit series*.

5.26 The *Outcomes...* team regularly reminds readers of *higher quality* and attendees at conferences that it is willing to analyse the Institutional audit reports, the collaborative provision audit reports and the Overseas audit reports on behalf of individuals and HEIs to produce 'bespoke' digests of information. The number of such requests (some via QAA liaison officers) has continued to grow through 2008-09 and enquiries have included requests for information on techniques of module evaluation; approaches to the appraisal of academic staff; attendance monitoring for first year students (as part of a developing retention strategy); and good practice in writing and managing formal agreements in educational partnerships.

5.27 The various discussion, consultation and dissemination meetings and conferences hosted by QAA provide discussion fora and all, in one way or another, seek to support QAA's strategy for enhancement and continuous improvement in the AI and associated guidance, and their application. Open public meetings in 2008-09 attracted over 500 registered delegates. Staff have also presented QAAs work at national and international conferences on a range of topics:

- '*Future Directions: Quality assurance and challenges for higher education in the twenty first century*'. SRHE, Liverpool, December 2008
- '*The terminology of quality assurance: on the way to a mutual understanding*'. Joint workshop with FINHEEC (Finland) at the E4 Forum in Budapest, November 2008
- '*QAA Code of practice, section 3: students with disabilities*' Disability and HE conference, Bruges, December 2008.

Working with stakeholders to ensure that the Academic Infrastructure is understood and used effectively

5.28 Staff from across QAA take part in two formal liaison schemes; one scheme covers HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the second the HE Academy's subject centre network. In 2008-09 both schemes addressed 'the quality assurance of employer responsive provision'. Representatives of fifty seven institutions and 11 subject centres participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by QAA officers. The findings of the survey and three case studies, showcasing different approaches to responding to employers needs, were presented at a conference, held on 10 July 2009, and attended by approximately 140 delegates. A reflective report, presenting a range of approaches adopted by institutions to the quality assurance of employer responsive provision, and the ways they have used the Academic Infrastructure will be published in 2009-10.

5.29 A fourth 'Working Together' discussion seminar for QAA and HE Academy staff was held on 12 May 2009, with 8 QAA staff and 23 HEA staff representing 17 Subject Centres and the generic centre attending. This annual meeting provides a venue for discussion of our various activities and for exchanging intelligence on developments within the HE sector. The meeting considered: the impact of changing student demographics on teaching and learning, employer engagement, the use of reference points for quality assurance at subject level and the work of the Quality Assurance Framework Stakeholder Group.

5.30 During 2008-09 particular priority has been given to work relating to: student engagement (reported separately in Section 6); employer engagement (including employer bodies, lifelong learning networks and widening participation and progression between the vocational education and training and HE sectors (including with QCA and partners, and the Joint Forum for Higher Levels).

5.31 Regular discussions are held with key employer bodies including Sector Skills Councils and various professional, regulatory and statutory bodies, to enable better information flow and understanding of matters dealing with the setting and assurance of (academic) standards and quality in an HE sector that is becoming increasingly diverse and more closely and directly linked with business. The work is organised within the strategic approach to 'employer engagement'. This work is closely linked with that being done by the representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE), funding council(s), FDF (formerly Foundation Degree Forward) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

5.32 QAA and the UK Interprofessional Group held three joint meetings in 2008-09. The meetings are designed to promote discussion about improving efficiency and effectiveness in the ways in which various (and sometimes overlapping) quality assurance responsibilities can be addressed. Topics considered at these meetings included; procedures for addressing Causes for Concern and use of each other's reports; issues of data sharing; devolution; and EU and international issues.

5.33 This and other work, in particular with various Lifelong Learning Networks and Skills Pathfinders, has informed the Board's strategy on standards and quality assurance and standards of HE learning linked through the (English) government and funding council priorities regarding employer engagement and workforce development. The statement released at the Subscribers' meeting in 2008 has been very well received by the relevant parts of the sector and their key stakeholders.

Undertaking special projects to identify effective quality assurance practices, and support their evolution and innovation; this is done through work both in the UK and in Europe

5.34 Following expressions of concern in the media about degree standards and other quality-related matters in June 2008, QAA proposed a programme of work to look into these. An action plan was approved by QAA's Board of Directors on 17 July 2008, immediately following a meeting of the IUSS Select Committee which took evidence from the QAA's Chief Executive on the topics raised. HEFCE agreed to provide funding for the part of the action plan which comprised thematic enquiries into the elements of concern particularly highlighted by the media, including:

- Student workload and contact hours
- Language requirements for international students
- Recruitment practices for international students
- The use of external examiners
- Institutional assessment practices

5.35 The project involved a detailed analysis of media coverage, comments and blogs as well as in depth interviews and focus group discussions with individuals from across the higher education sector. Published and unpublished reports, papers, lectures and speeches, including memoranda submitted to the IUSSC inquiry into 'students and universities', were also examined.

5.36 The final report on *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England* was published in May 2009. The report was well received and has informed the discussions and its findings quoted in the reports of Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry 'Students and Universities', HEFCE's TQSE sub-committee report on *HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance* and DBIS HE Framework *Higher Ambitions* and the discussions of the Quality Assurance Framework Stakeholder Group. On 9 July 2009 the QAA Board approved an outline action plan for the follow up work, *Sustaining quality and standards in higher education*. The action plan describes further activity during 2009-10 to address, in priority order:

- processes used to identify, train and support external examiners, including re-opening the debate about whether there should be a nationally agreed set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners
- effective ways of informing the general public about academic standards and quality in higher education and the purpose and principles of external quality assurance processes
- a review of assessment and degree classification practices across and between institutions
- the range of contact hours appropriate to the student learning experience
- guidance offered to international students about UK higher education, the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher education institutions, including English language support and personal and academic support.

5.37 During 2008-09 QAA staff have been invited participants in a wide range of international activities and asked to provide expert advice to numerous international working groups, commissions and review panels. This included the appointment of a member of QAA staff to the ENQA Board in September 2008. These activities, which support UK HE engagement with European and International quality assurance and enhancement include: participating in ENQA reviews of other quality assurance agencies; audit/accreditation reviews of institutions and programmes; think tanks and workshops for governments, agencies and rectors' conferences; and taking the lead in the ENQA (Bologna wide) Quality Procedures Project.

Summary

5.38 In terms of the main roles and development and enhancement activities the year's key themes may be summarised as:

Review and revision of the Academic Infrastructure:

- Completion of the review and revision of the FHEQ and its self certification, at the request of Ministers, against the FQ-EHEA
- Providing expert advice and essential support for the development and implementation of the Credit Framework for HE in England; monitoring of its adoption and clarification of the relationship between qualifications and credit frameworks and their contribution to the assurance of quality and standards
- Phase 2 of the review and revision of subject benchmarks was completed; the Benchmark recognition scheme, while working well, will be reviewed in 2009-10 to ensure that it remains effective; development of a 'Masters characteristics' paper for consultation and establishment of a multi-agency project to examine 'UK doctoral characteristics'
- review and revision of two sections of the *Code of practice* (3 and 8); once published they will complete the revision of all parts of the Academic Infrastructure
- providing events and publications, mostly for the HE sector but also key stakeholders, to support and promote the Academic Infrastructure and its effective implementation
 - the discussions ('round table') meetings and conferences focussed on development and enhancement activities are almost always oversubscribed and well received
 - in addition to the formal (consultation) documents published in relation to the review and revision of the AI, significant resources are committed to the *Outcomes...* series. These have attracted wide attention both across the HE sectors in the UK and abroad, and some reports have also been the subject to wider interest amongst key stakeholders, including the national press, Government and Parliamentary Select Committees
 - increasing attention and resource has been committed to promoting a better understanding of the AI and its use in FECs.

Working with stakeholders to ensure that the Academic Infrastructure is understood and used effectively

- The 'employer-responsive provision' discussions undertaken through the HE and subject centre liaison schemes was a major project during 2008-09. The insights HEIs gave into their approaches to policy development, have provided a wealth of information. The project illustrates the value that institutions now place in working with QAA on matters concerned with standards and quality but that are not directly linked to audit or review.
- particular time and attention has been given to working with organisations and staff involved in developing and delivering key government and funding council priorities. In particular this relates to employer engagement, widening participation and progression. Both areas extend the boundaries of traditional HE, a clear understanding and proper application of the shared bases of standards and quality is essential.

Undertaking special projects to identify effective quality assurance (QA) practices, and support their evolution and innovation; this is done through work both in the UK and in Europe

- Phase one of the enquiry represents a substantial body of work, conducted under the close scrutiny of external bodies, stakeholders and media. The progress and outcomes of the Enquiry have informed and incorporated into, the discussions of related inquiries and evaluations (for example reports of Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry '*Students and Universities*', HEFCE's TQSE sub-committee report on *HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance*, DBIS HE Framework *Higher Ambitions* and the discussions of the Quality Assurance Framework Stakeholder Group). The impact of the findings from Phase one has the potential to be far-reaching and significant in the immediate and longer term.
- Staff have contributed to a number of international projects which are, or will have, significant impacts, including work concerned with: doctoral and postdoctoral students and staff; student assessment; and a major comparative review of quality procedures across the whole of the 'Bologna area'.

6 Working with students

6.1 The *Strategic plan 2006-11*⁴ identifies students as having a key interest in the safeguarding of academic standards and in the continuous improvement of quality management. QAA believes that an important feature of higher education is that students are active participants in their own education and therefore can and should be directly involved in the sector's approaches to quality assurance and enhancement.

6.2 Building on developments in 2007-08, during 2009-09 QAA has continued to undertake extensive work in relation to students and student involvement in its core activities. QAA has taken a lead in developing new and innovative ways of engaging students in important decisions about HE provision in England and has identified communicating information about quality and standards on higher education to students as one of its purposes, supporting initiatives from the National Student Forum, BIS (formerly DIUS) and HEFCE. Likewise, QAA recognises the importance of student involvement in assurance and enhancement of quality and standards of their higher education.

6.3 Throughout 2008-09, QAA has continued to strengthen links with students and student representative bodies. Activities included student participation in the audit and IQER processes, through the students' written submission, and meetings with audit teams. In response to a consultation in 2007-08 on student involvement in quality assurance and a successful pilot of student observers on audit teams, QAA has revised the Institutional audit process to include students as full members of audit teams, for implementation in 2009-10, and has successfully recruited and trained student auditors in preparation.

Student engagement in QAA activities

6.4 Through the evaluation process of audit and IQER, students welcomed the opportunity to participate and express their views, and institutions and audit/review teams valued the contributions that students made in meetings and through the student written submission (SWS). Students repeatedly commented that the audit and review processes would ultimately enhance the student learning experience within institutions and welcomed the opportunity to provide an input, either through a student written submission or through meetings with the review teams, or both. In many instances, direct action and change was reported as a result of the SWS and associated preparatory activities.

6.5 Benefits identified by students of involvement in IQER included:

- getting the student voice heard and their needs acknowledged
- acting as a catalyst for change that can benefit current and future students
- providing students the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses associated with their learning experience and higher education experience more generally
- a greater understanding of institutional process, and arrangements for ensuring the quality and standards of the student learning experience.

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/strategicPlan/2006/Strategicplan06-11.pdf.

6.6 Challenges reported by students of their involvement in IQER included:

- insufficient time to contribute, and accommodating this around lectures and assessments and other activities
- trying to involve the all students from all sections of the student body, to ensure a greater degree of representativeness
- lack of a student representative's structure at course level
- keeping the students focussed on a particular matter and not allowing the focus group feedback to turn into a complaint forum.

6.7 Benefits identified by students through their involvement in audit included:

- getting the student voice heard both by external people and also the institution
- assurance of quality and standards for current and prospective students
- sharing of good practice throughout HE
- institution more likely to make improvements to student experience.

6.8 Challenges identified by students in respect of their involvement in audit included:

- getting a representative sample of students to meet audit team
- ensuring those students involved will provide representative rather than individual views
- lack of understanding of institutional structure
- getting students involved at all.

6.9 QAA has also revised materials to support students and student representative bodies in preparation for audit and review. The new materials have been developed in consultation with students, to ensure that the advice and guidance provided is both useful and fit for purpose.

Student membership of audit and review teams

6.10 In 2007-08 QAA initiated consultations with the HE sector in England about including students as members of audit and review teams. This was followed asking a number of students to observe Institutional audits and provide feedback to QAA on their perspective of the contributions that a student could make to the process and their training and support needs.

6.11 The outcome of the consultation and student observers on audit teams was a decision to revise the Institutional audit process from 2009-10, to include a student as a full member on audit teams.

6.12 During 2008-09, QAA entered into discussions with HEIs in order to establish which institutions were willing to have a student as a member of the team for their subsequent audit. Only 11 institutions opted out of having a student auditor.

6.13 The first call for applications to become student members of Institutional audit teams for England and Northern Ireland went out in February 2009. The recruitment attracted around 90 applications from across the UK. Following a briefing and selection event in May 2009, 50 students were invited to join the register of QAA auditors in June. The range of successful applicants was pleasing in that the students recruited came from a range of institutional types, and had experience of

different modes and levels of study. As a result, a number of students were allocated to Institutional audits taking place in spring and summer 2010. As a prerequisite of participating in audit activities, students selected to join audit teams for this period were invited to the intensive training programme alongside other auditors and audit secretaries.

Student engagement workshop and conferences

6.14 In February 2009, QAA held a series of three focus groups with student representatives, the aim of the events were to inform future developments and changes to QAA's audit and review methods.

6.15 A briefing event focusing on student involvement in IQER was held in Birmingham on 21 April 2009. The event was attended by 31 students and student liaison officers. The aims of the event were to:

- allow higher education students and student liaison officers from further education colleges to share their views about student involvement in the design and management of higher education programmes
- allow higher education students and student liaison officers from further education colleges to share experiences of taking part in QAA's reviews of further education colleges
- discuss how QAA could encourage greater student involvement in the management of higher education in further education colleges, including through IQER

6.16 Delegates all considered that the event had been useful and informative, and had achieved its stated aims. Delegates considered that they had benefited from attending the event through networking, sharing experiences and gaining knowledge. QAA intends to build on this by working with Ofsted and the AoC to facilitate further opportunities to share practice.

6.17 A conference for student representatives was held on 26 May 2009 at the CEEBL Centre, Manchester. Thirty-seven student representatives attended the event.

6.18 The aims of the conference were to:

- give delegates an overview of the Institutional audit process and the role of students in it
- share some insights from students and staff who have been through the audit process
- share ideas and tips about writing the SWS
- share ideas about how to work with your institution to make changes after the audit has been completed.

6.19 Respondents reported that they had found the conference to be highly useful.

6.20 On 24 June 2009, QAA held a student engagement workshop. The event was attended by 115 delegates. The event was intended to provide a forum to give delegates the opportunity to hear directly from a range of higher education providers about the innovative approaches they have taken to engage students in quality assurance and enhancement. In addition, delegates were given the opportunity to

listen to others, to share their own experiences, and to take some new ideas and information back to their institutions to consider when developing their own student engagement activities.

6.21 Overall, the feedback provided was overwhelmingly positive, with delegates finding the event both useful and informative. A variety of suggestions was made as to how QAA might progress student engagement, specifically in relation to communication and support.

6.22 There was broad agreement that the most useful aspects of the conference were the opportunity to listen to the experiences of others and share knowledge in respect of student engagement. Additionally, delegates considered that the case study presentations and workshop sessions had been particularly useful. They also welcomed the opportunity to both listen and engage in discussion with others.

Information for student representatives

6.23 In response to feedback from student representatives regarding the accessibility of information about student involvement in quality assurance, during 2008-09, QAA undertook to create a series of short films about. In addition, QAA has revised its guidance for students and student representatives, in preparation for review and audit.

6.24 In order to provide accessible information in support of student preparations for audit and review, QAA engaged a group of current student representatives to help with the writing of the material. Involvement of student representatives in writing the materials sought to ensure that they were fit for purpose, useful and informative and accessible to the attended audience. These have been made available in hard copy and published on the QAA website.

6.25 A series of short films were produced following the May event in Manchester and the June event in Birmingham. The films were derived from the various conference presentations and conversations with conference delegates. The films have been posted on the QAA website.

6.26 Specific short films include:

- Why do students want to engage?
- The benefits and opportunities of student engagement
- Overcoming challenges
- The importance of student engagement (interview with Peter Williams, Chief Executive QAA)
- What is Institutional audit?
- Why should students get involved?
- Importance of the student written submission
- What to do after the audit
- Top tips

6.27 Following the launch of the short films, QAA will be conducting a formal evaluation of their effectiveness during 2009-10.

Other information

6.28 An internal working group has continued to coordinate the activities across QAA, with the aim of bringing more coherence to our work with sector and national bodies, to support capacity building within HEIs for student involvement in quality, and to improve provision of information for students and potential students.

6.29 QAA staff meet regularly with the officers and staff of the NUS and the National Postgraduate Committee.

Summary

6.30 During 2008-09, QAA has continued to make significant progress in respect of student engagement. As a direct result, of work to date, QAA has produced a series of bespoke information resources, held student centred events (in conjunction with partners) and has successfully recruited and trains student members of audit teams for deployment in audit from 2010 onwards.

7 QAA evaluation and monitoring

7.1 During 2008-09, QAA undertook the evaluation and monitoring of the various audit and review activities and training and briefing events. All evaluation and monitoring activity took place in accordance with QAA's evaluation policy and strategy.

7.2 QAA is committed to reflecting on its processes by undertaking a formal evaluation of all its audit and review activities. Evaluation serves a variety of purposes, not least of which is reporting to HEFCE and other stakeholders as part of QAA's contractual requirements. The systematic evaluation of activities allows for the identification of good practice and highlights aspects of activity where there is scope for further development as part of the process of continuous improvement.

7.3 The continual monitoring and internal reporting on evaluation activities has provided a valuable mechanism for the early identification of good practice and problems, so facilitating early resolution. QAA is confident that participant groups are broadly satisfied that the audit and review processes, and training and briefing events, have achieved their intended aim and met the expectations of those involved.

Process evaluation

7.4 Following the completion of all review and audit activities, formal evaluation was undertaken by means of questionnaire surveys and focus group activities. The evaluation involved all relevant participant stakeholder groups - student representative bodies, institutions and reviewers/auditors.

7.5 Across all methods, response rates were high and feedback was highly positive. In the main, respondents agreed that the review/audit activities had met the stated aims and had generated tangible benefits for the institution, and subsequently the student learning experience.

Evaluation of other activities

7.6 During 2008-09 QAA ran a number of training and briefing events, and a wide range of conference, discussion and dissemination events. One of the strategic themes within the *Strategic plan 2006-2011* is that of offering expertise. This is embedded in the support and contribution that QAA staff make to other UK and international conference events as presenters of papers, session convenors and chairs. QAA additionally provides extensive information, through publications and formal visits, to other international agencies involved in higher education and quality and standards of such education systems.

Examples of activities include:

- auditors and reviewer training
- briefing events and road shows for providers of higher education and awarding bodies
- round table discussion events
- annual subscribers conference
- annual liaison conference
- focus groups
- review method-specific conferences, supporting reviewers' and auditors' continued professional development
- events aimed specifically at students and student representatives
- thematic conference events with an emphasis on the dissemination of pertinent information.

7.7 All conference, training and briefing events delivered by QAA are subject to evaluation, so facilitating a reflective approach to both content and delivery. The continuous cycle of evaluation of events has ensured that any areas identified by respondents as requiring further attention or provision of information can be addressed for the future.

7.8 Feedback gathered through the evaluation questionnaires across all training and briefing events and conferences was overwhelmingly positive. Particular reference was made by delegates to the format of delivery, content of events and the overall usefulness of events for training and disseminating information.

7.9 In order to ensure that events are as useful as possible to delegates, QAA seeks to ensure external input. This provides an opportunity to hear reflections and examples from others within the higher education sector, through updates on reflective case studies and experiences. Delegates at training, briefing and conference events repeatedly highlight case study examples as a highly positive feature of such events.

7.10 The QAA Subscribers' Meeting was held on 3 June 2009 in Belfast. It was attended by 142 delegates. Delegates commented favourably on the format and content of the event.

7.11 During July 2009, QAA hosted the Annual Liaison Conference. The theme of the Liaison Scheme project for 2008-09 was Employer Engagement, and the conference sought to disseminate the findings from the project back to delegates. The event also provided the opportunity to test and develop principles related to employer engagement, which could be further developed by QAA to support employer engagement in higher education. The event was well attended and the

feedback was highly positive, with respondents remarking that the event was useful and timely. Specific reference was made to the usefulness of the findings from the annual Liaison Survey, and the case study examples presented by institutions.

7.12 During 2008-09, QAA hosted and contributed to a wealth of UK based and overseas events, as part of its responsibilities and strategy for disseminating information pertaining to quality assurance and enhancement in higher education. QAA has worked with other organisations to ensure that pertinent information is disseminated in a timely and accessible format to a variety of audiences.

Summary

7.13 QAA continues to deliver a variety of external events with the primary aim of the dissemination of information about specific aspects of QAA work or providing training for those involved in the work of QAA. As confirmed by the current and previous evaluations, such events are well received by delegates in terms of their content, organisation, delivery and usefulness.

7.14 As with previous years, evidence has suggested that case study information, presented by those outside QAA who are directly involved in activities, is particularly useful to delegates in supplementing the information disseminated by QAA. As such, QAA has taken steps to ensure that case studies are included in training, briefing and other dissemination events, as appropriate. In addition, role play scenarios have been well received by delegates at training events, as these are considered as helpful in preparing for audit and review.

7.15 QAA is mindful to the impacts on the environment associated with events. As a result, during 2008-9, event delegates have been asked to provide information about mode of transport and distance travelled. This is currently being analysed and will be used to inform QAA's approach to environmental sustainability, and the use of new media and other technology to minimise impact on the environment of QAA activities, while ensuring that pertinent information is disseminated as appropriate.

8 Causes for Concern

8.1 In response to discussions with HEFCE, DIUS (now BIS) and the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, in 2007, QAA developed a procedure for handling Causes for Concern in institutions that provide higher education in England and Wales. This was revised in 2008 to include complaints from the public as well as those and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The major revisions for 2008-09 were:

- the extension of the protocols to allow initiation of an investigation by a member of the public (typically a student, former student or former member of staff). Such cases undergo analysis by a QAA officer before proceeding to the investigation stage or closure
- appointment of a method coordinator for Wales and England, and creation of a Process Committee (three times each year) and of an Operations Group (every three weeks).

8.2 A Cause for Concern is strictly defined for this purpose as 'any policy, procedure or action implemented or omitted by an institution that appears likely to jeopardise the academic standards and quality of its higher education programmes and/or awards'.

8.3 The main principles underpinning the procedure are twofold: first, that the power to declare a possible Cause for Concern should be limited to a group of named organisations, principally statutory, regulatory, and some professional bodies; and secondly, that any response by QAA to a request from one of those organisations to investigate an apparent difficulty should be phased and proportionate, beginning with an informal enquiry and only progressing to a full investigation where this is considered to be necessary in the light of evidence gathered.

8.4 In 2008-09 QAA handled 34 new Causes for Concern cases. Of these, 32 cases were applications from members of the public. One of these is sufficiently strong that it may result in a Preliminary Enquiry (case subject to second round of analysis). The other public-initiated cases either failed on strength of evidence at the stage of QAA officer-analysis or are open pending supply of evidence by the complainant or QAA decision. In 2008-09 there was one PSRB-initiated case, now at the reporting stage. There was one QAA-initiated case, which is now closed.

8.5 To date, there have not been sufficient Causes for Concern applications for QAA to be entirely confident of patterns. Some tentative generalisations can be made, however. One theme in Causes for Concern work (both applications and enquiries) has been the alleged manipulation of marks by HEI management. A second theme has been student dissatisfaction with dissertation supervision and marking. In the area of collaborative provision, there have been various complaints concerning the management by British institutions of overseas links. Links with Malaysia have been cited in three complaints, but none of these complaints has become a Causes for Concern enquiry. It is not clear that there is a general UK weakness in dealings with Malaysian institutions.

8.6 The Causes for Concern procedure of QAA is likely to be of growing importance in the current higher education context. There is a growing funding body and political expectation that more, and more pointed, enquiries should be made of HEIs and FEIs.

8.7 QAA has responded to these expectations and to its experience of 2008-09 by drafting major revisions to the Causes for Concern procedures. These revisions are likely to add an 'intelligence-led' component to QAA's current responses to public and PSRB complaints. Proposals will go to the Board and then to sector consultation.

9 Summary and recommendations

9.1 The evidence in this report indicates that the providers of higher education in England generally have robust arrangements for the management of quality and academic standards. External audit and review processes are effective in commending good practice and in recommending areas for improvement in individual institutions. Where problems are identified, institutions respond rapidly and comprehensively to ensure that the quality of learning opportunities are secured. The engagement with QAA provides a focus for the development of quality assurance processes and for supporting the continuous improvement of academic practice.

9.2 2008-09 was the first year of the full IQER programme for further education Colleges involving both developmental engagements and summative reviews. The evidence is very encouraging. Colleges have demonstrated their ability to manage the delegated responsibilities from awarding bodies through clear and robust procedures and with a particular commitment to the learning experience of their students. Good use has been made of the Academic Infrastructure in the design and implementation of quality assurance procedures. Colleges have also, through the developmental engagements, demonstrated a willing and enthusiastic commitment to quality enhancement. In some Colleges there is more work to be done, but the general message from the evaluation of IQER is that the method has made a significant contribution to the development of quality assurance arrangements for higher education in further education colleges.

9.3 It has also been a year when there has been much discussion and debate about the standards and quality of higher education provision. The work of the IUSS Select Committee and HEFCE's TQSE sub-committee have both highlighted a number of areas where there is a need to review current arrangements and put in place measures that will provide greater public assurance about the quality of learning opportunities across the range of higher education provision. QAA has also conducted a number of thematic inquiries into areas identified in the media and elsewhere, as potential threats to quality and standards and identified recommendations and an action plan for addressing these concerns.

9.4 The research and deliberations have focused particularly on two key areas where there is an urgent need to progress matters. These are the effectiveness of current arrangements for external examining, and the information that is made available for prospective students, employers and others about what is on offer in higher education. Both of these now form strands of work which will contribute to the reform of quality assurance arrangements. QAA is fully supporting these developments.

9.5 The outcomes of this work, together with more recent contributions from BIS (*Higher Ambitions* report, November 2009) and the forthcoming review of student finances under the chairmanship of Lord Browne, will help to frame a new agenda for quality assurance in England. The various elements of the quality assurance framework, agreed in 2002, have provided a firm basis for the development and maintenance of quality systems both within institutions and across the sector. But increasingly the framework has proved inflexible and it is timely to look again at the basic principles and structures that underpin the maintenance of quality in English higher education. HEFCE, DELNI, UUK and GuildHE have sponsored a review of the framework. Consultation on a set of proposals for a revised 'Quality Assurance System' is taking place between December 2009 and March 2010. The outcomes of

this consultation will inform the development of a revised Institutional audit method that will be introduced in September 2011.

9.6 The new emerging agenda for quality will focus on a number of issues including:

- a more flexible and responsive audit method
- revised procedures for demonstrating the comparability of standards between institutions and between subject disciplines.
- a renewed interest in the quality of teaching
- an enhanced focus on the students' learning experience (including contact hours)
- greater involvement of students in quality processes
- a focus on higher education designed for and delivered within the workplace
- an emphasis on public information provided by higher education providers
- revised mechanisms for dealing with complaints and concerns about the quality of higher education
- a more public facing role for QAA, acting in the interest of the public as well as meeting the expectations of funders and subscribers.

9.7 In addition, there are other areas relating to quality and standards where further work by QAA could contribute, along with other organisations, to the enhancement of current practice. These include:

9.8 **Student engagement.** During 2009-10, QAA has introduced students as full members of Institutional audit teams and is looking at arrangements for their inclusion in other review methods. The work on student engagement also includes support for the development of student representation within institutions and the greater involvement of students, at all levels, in quality assurance activities. QAA has continued to work closely with partners and student representatives to provide accessible information to student representatives to highlight the work of QAA and provide useful information to support preparations for involvement in audit and review activities.

9.9 Following a Communications impact assessment in 2009-10, QAA will seek to clarify arrangements for the provision of material about its role and quality and standards in higher education, for a range of stakeholder groups, to including potential students. This will not be undertaken in isolation, but in partnership with other stakeholder and representative groups.

9.10 **Employer engagement.** QAA has identified good practice in employer engagement through its review activities and has supported the development of employer involvement through revisions to sections of the *Code of practice*. Employer engagement and employer responsive provision was explored through the QAA Annual Liaison Theme, resulting in a national conference and set of published guidelines. QAA will continue to support developments in this area through the provision of guidance and a review of existing external frameworks, namely the Academic Infrastructure.

9.11 **Public information.** Institutional audit and IQER both include coverage of public information, but it is recognised that this is an area where more could be achieved. The National Student Forum has identified a need to improve the quality and accessibility of information about programmes to allow students to make informed choices about their higher education studies. QAA is investigating the use

of new media and stakeholders' information needs in order to ensure that public information is available to inform potential students, and other stakeholders about quality and standards and the higher education learning experience. This will be developed during 2009-10 and 2010-11.

9.12 **National Student Survey.** Public information is one aspect of the quality assurance framework. The findings of the National Student Survey provide a wealth of information for institutions and colleges that can be used to inform assurance and enhancement activity. QAA suggests that benefits might arise from exploring how institutions use the outcomes of the National Student Survey as part of their quality assurance and enhancement activities, alongside other sources of information.

9.13 **International activities.** QAA has been working with the UK Borders Agency to support the revised arrangements for the approval and monitoring on international students studying in the UK. Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice* on collaborative arrangements is currently under review. The new version will take into account the responsibilities of institutions offering awards to international students in collaboration with private providers in the UK.

9.14 During 2008-09 QAA conducted an overseas audit of UK higher education awards offered in partnership with providers in India. The audit involved 10 partnership links and a number of supporting case studies. An overview report, based on the evidence collected was published in July 2009.

9.15 QAA is committed to reducing the burden of information provision upon institutions. Building on the work that QAA is undertaking on behalf of BIS for the Listed Bodies Order, QAA is exploring opportunities for collection of information from higher education institutions about their collaborative partnerships in the delivery of higher education through an annual census. This would reduce the overall burden of information provision upon institutions, by reducing ad hoc information gathering exercises by QAA, and formalising an annual return. QAA proposes to pilot this activity during 2009-10, and develop an approach, in consultation with the UK HE sector.

9.16 QAA continues to work in partnership with institutions, students and other stakeholder bodies, to assure the quality and standards of higher education. During 2009-10 we will continue to strengthen our work and start to develop a new strategic plan from 2011 providing a clear statement of our future aims and objectives.

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QAA (unpublished report to HEFCE)

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QAA

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www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/infobulletins/FDFendorsement.pdf

QAA

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Appendix 1: Institutional audit

Institutional audit (2008-09)

Institution
Aston University
Bournemouth University
City University
Coventry University
De Montfort University
Goldsmiths College
Lancaster University
Leeds Metropolitan University
Leeds Trinity and All Saints
Liverpool Hope University
Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts
Middlesex University
Nottingham Trent University
Open University
Rose Bruford College
Royal Veterinary College*
Southampton Solent University
University College London
University of Bath
University of Birmingham
University of Bristol
University of Central Lancashire
University of Durham
University of East Anglia
University of Greenwich
University of Hertfordshire
University of Hull
University of Kent
University of Leicester
University of Liverpool
University of Northampton
University of Oxford
University of Portsmouth
University of Sunderland
University of Surrey
University of Warwick
University of the West of England, Bristol
University of Winchester
University of Wolverhampton

*Due to an administrative error, no evaluation questionnaires were sent for this audit.

Appendix 2: IQER

Developmental engagements (2008-09)

College
Abingdon and Witney College
Ashton under Lyne Sixth Form College
Barnfield College
Basingstoke College of Technology
Bishop Burton College
Bradford College
Brooklands College
Brooksby Melton College
Cambridge Regional College
Canterbury College
Chichester College
City College Coventry
City College Norwich
City College Plymouth
City of Bristol College
Croydon College
Dearne Valley College
Grantham College
Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education
Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
Hackney Community College
Hadlow College
Havering College of Further and Higher Education
Hereford College of Arts
Hertford Regional College
Hugh Baird College
Leeds College of Building
Leicester College
Lincoln College
Milton Keynes College
Myerscough College
Newcastle College
Newham Sixth Form College
Petroc
North West Kent College of Technology
Plymouth College of Art
Reaseheath College
Riverside College Halton
Ruskin College, Oxford
Salford College
Somerset College of Arts and Technology
South Devon College

South Downs College
South East Essex College of Arts and Technology
South Leicestershire College
South Thames College
Southampton City College
St Vincent College
Tameside College
The College of West Anglia
The Sheffield College
Tresham Institute
Tyne Metropolitan College
Walsall College of Arts and Technology
Warwickshire College
West Thames College
Wiltshire College
Wirral Metropolitan College
Yorkshire Coast College of Further and Higher Education
College of North West London
Dudley College of Technology
Havering College of Further and Higher Education
Highbury College Portsmouth
Lewisham College
West Cheshire College
Westminster Kingsway College

Summative reviews (2008-09)

Alton College
Askham Bryan College
Bolton Community College
Calderdale College
Carshalton College
Central Sussex College
Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education
Henley College Coventry
Herefordshire College of Technology
Huntingdonshire Regional College
Kingston College
Lakes College
Loughborough College
Nelson and Colne College
North Hertfordshire College
Richmond Upon Thames College
South Tyneside College
Sparsholt College
Swindon College
Thanet College

The City Literary Institute
West Hertfordshire College
Wigan and Leigh College
York College

Appendix 3: Comparison data: 2007-08 and 2008-09

Institutional audit

Judgements

Judgement	Confidence	Limited confidence	Limited confidence restricted to certain provision
The soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards	37	1	2
The soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students	38	0	2

N=40

Institutional audit (2008-09)

Judgement	Confidence	Limited confidence	Limited confidence restricted to certain provision
The soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards	26	1	1
The soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students	28	0	0

N=28

Institutional audit (2007-08)

Recommendations

Judgement	2007-08	2008-09
Desirable	77 (2.75)	121 (3.03)
Advisable	69 (2.46)	104 (2.6)
Essential	6 (0.21)	5 (0.13)
Total audits	28	40

Recommendations per year

Note by (x) by audit

Integrated quality and enhancement review

Judgements

	Judgement on Academic Standards	Judgement on Quality of Learning Opportunities	Public Information
Confidence	22	23	
Limited confidence	1		
No confidence	1	1	
Reliance			23
No reliance			1

N=24

Outcomes of Summative reviews (2008-09)

There was only one summative review in 2007-08; this was carried forward from the 2006-07 pilot.

Recommendations

Judgement	2007-08	2008-09
Desirable	126 (4.2)	279 (4.23)
Advisable	57 (1.9)	119 (1.8)
Essential	0	4 (0.06)
Total reviews	30	66

Developmental engagements

Note by (x) by review

Judgement	2007-08	2008-09
Desirable		79 (3.29)
Advisable		48 (2.00)
Essential		2 (0.08)
Total reviews	1	24

Summative reviews

Note by (x) by review

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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